First Fire Department established in 1941

By May Ballard

The 1945 annual of the Tidewater Fireman's Association reports that on October 10, 1941 eighteen men met at Trinity Methodist Church in Poquoson with Chief Eddie Ware of the Wythe Fire Department. Their purpose was to "Organize a department and to put forth efforts to secure funds for necessary equipment" for the first fire department in the district of Poquoson.

W. Herbert Amory was elected president of the newly formed organization. Norris L. Thomas served as secretary and John F. Rollins as treasurer.

The Messick Fire Department was so named because of it's location in the south eastern section of the Poquoson District. Bernard Smith, Alton White, and Burium Rollins were appointed to the "committee to investigate prices" for the purchase of a truck and hoses.

The first fire truck was actually a 1941 Ford flatbed purchased from Riggins Motor Company at cost. Steel was obtained from Newport News Shipbuilding Company to construct a 650 gallon water tank and running boards on the chassy of the flatbed. According to H. Gray Forrest, a former Messick fireman, after the truck was completed in early 1942 it was first housed in the old Barrel Factory building on Poquoson Avenue. The Barrel Factory was used as a shelter until a cinder block station was completed early in 1943.

The first Messick Fire Station was located across from Trinity Methodist Church in the building now known as the "Cross Roads." The original structure was basically a double compartment garage designed to house two trucks. The property itself was still owned by Trinity Church. Forrest says the first living quarters were renovated sections of other dwellings that were added to the station around 1950. The additions were obtained from the old homeplace of Norman and Nell Pauls and the Hampton Crab Plant owned by Henry Hunt, another Messick fireman.

The building was maintained as the station house until the present fire station was completed in 1970.

The first Fire Chief in 1941 was Garland Forrest, followed shortly by Alton White. The Messick Fire Department was a total volunteer organization. It was maintained solely by private donations and fund raising activities. A donation of $5, usually solicited door to door, would entitle one to membership in Messick Fire Department. Finances were a big problem and often the firemen themselves paid for the gas in their first engine. The members also furnished their own boots, turn out pants, and coats. Wally G. White, one of the first assistant fire chiefs, remembers that he fought fires in "Whatever I was wearing when the sirens sounded."

The engine was equipped with axes, shovels, and brooms. The portable Indian Pump was also used to combat brush fires in the 1940's. This piece of equipment was a five gallon water tank which was strapped to the fireman and operated on the same principle as an air rifle to force water through the nozzle. Salt water was often used since fresh water was not always available. Forrest recalls "Dropping a suction line in a ditch" to pump water to the 650 gallon tank of fire engine No. 1.

The Messick Fire Station did not have a telephone in the early 40's. Consequently, residents would often call a nearby general store to report a fire. Someone in the store would run to the station, sound the alarm and leave the address on a chalkboard before driving to the scene of the fire. The responsibility of driving the fire engine fell to the first man to arrive at the station. It was not until January 1949 that Engineer William H. Proctor became the first paid fireman of the Messick Department. One month later the department hired Lorenzo Insley followed by Clarence Evans.

In 1943, shortly after the outbreak of World War II, the Messick Fire Department leased their only engine to the United States Government. The truck was taken to Copeland Industrial Park in Hampton, and remained there until 1944. This was part of a defense effort in the event of enemy bombing raids. Assistant Chief Vern Watkins accompanied the truck to Hampton. During this period the engine would be brought back into town in the event of a fire.

The Messick Volunteer Fire Department provided protection not only for Poquoson but also much of lower York County, Tabb, and Seaford. They also assisted the Hampton Fire Department in fighting large brush fires in the Fox Hill area. During such occasions the wives of the Messick Department would often provide food and coffee to sustain the men while fire fighting. These women were the forerunners of the Poquoson Ladies Auxiliary. Under the direction of Mrs. Mary Quinn, wife of the Chief Ballard S. Quinn, the Ladies Auxiliary was officially chartered in 1955. The Ladies Auxiliary remains active today in providing funds and equipment for the fire department. It was this same auxiliary that was chiefly responsible for the acquisition of the first ambulance in 1957.

Poquoson District became a township in 1952 and the Messick Volunteer Fire Depaprtment became the Poquoson Volunteer Fire Department. Melvin Martin was the first fireman to be employed by the town of Poquoson. According to Lt. Robert Wood, our present fire department boasts sixty volunteer fireman, fifteen apprentice fireman, and ten paid fireman. They maintain four fire engines, three ambulances and one Advance Life Support vehicle.

Despite many adversities, the Messick Volunteer Fire Department grew from eighteen men into an efficient contemporary organization. The key to their success is best described by H. Gray Forrest, "What we lacked in money and equipment, we always made up in plain team work and cooperation."

Melvin Martin (left) and an unidentified fireman check the fire department's early equipment. In the foreground, the 1941 flatbed Ford converted for fire fighting. Also shown are the first "real" fire engine and first ambulance.

Activities set for fire carnival

Planning is underway for the 1983 Poquoson Fire Carnival, May 27 and 28. A wide variety of activities are being scheduled this year.

On May 20 a Donkey Baseball game will be held between the Police Department and the Fire Department and Auxiliary. It will be held at 6 p.m. on the baseball field at the end of Parks Street behind the middle school. Tickets are $2 in advance and $3 at the gate. You can get your advanced tickets now at Farm Fresh, Sheffield's Grocery store on Poquoson Avenue, and Brown's Upholstery on Wythe Creek Road. Program chairman is Ann Binford, 868-6111.

Carnival Bingo will be held May 24, 7:30 p.m. at the Fire Station on Poquoson Avenue.

Games and rides will be available for the kids from 6 to 9 p.m. on Friday and all day Saturday.

The parade will begin at 10 a.m. on Saturday morning. Entries are still being accepted. Call Chairman De Jordan, 868-8344, if you want to enter.

Registration is now underway for the King and Queen Sparky contests. Contestants must be 15 years old and Poquoson residents. All entrants in the Sparky contests must also be residents of Poquoson. Age divisions are six to eight years old for Little Miss Sparky, nine to 11 for Junior Miss Sparky and 12 to 14 for Miss Sparky. For more information on these contests, contact Marie Firth at 868-8682 or Pat McDowell at 868-9855

Trip to Tangier Island planned

The Peninsula Nature and Science Center is conducting a trip on May 7 to the remote "Island of Tangier," located in the Chesapeake Bay. The tour group will depart from Newport News by chartered bus at 7:30 a.m. for Reedville, Va. There they will board a 70 foot sight-seeing ship for the 1 hour and 45 minute cruise across Chesapeake Bay to Tangier Island. A local guide will give a brief tour of the Island. There will be time for exploration and to visit the gift shops. You may wish to eat a family style seafood dinner at the Chesapeake House, have sandwiches at the patio shop, or just bring a picnic lunch. Return to the Center is scheduled for 6:30 p.m.

For fee and reservation information call 595-1900.

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